

Rise of the Indian American Media

By SHEETAL NASTA

As the appetite for Indian news and culture grows, the Indian American media has grown in response, from community newspapers filled with news agency articles to diverse formats such as target-audience glossy magazines.

Although American newspapers are rethinking their budgets, firing reporters and editors and contemplating their very existence in the future online information age, the number of publications that cater to Indian American and other ethnic populations is actually increasing. As ethnic communities burgeon, advertisers are considering alternative strategies to capture the buying power of America's fastest growing populations. The market is highly volatile, however, with constant new competition from online offerings, and many of the new publications have a short lifespan.

The past two decades have seen the birth of a plethora of news weeklies and glossy magazines aimed at Indian American readers. At least 33 such online and print publications in North America are listed on www.garamchai.com, a Web site that provides information for non-resident Indians and others of Asian origin in America.

"Each month there are more and more Indian newspapers and magazines that announce their launch," says Diana Rohini LaVigne, online editor of *Indian Life & Style* magazine, an India-West Publications venture started in 2004. "But I see even more of them go out of business or change their business model to reflect the downturn of the market for media outlets."

LaVigne, 33, is an American born in Boston, Massachusetts, who says she discovered her "Indian self" more than a decade ago, when she dove head-first into Indian culture, and later married a North Indian. She has since contributed to a slew of South Asian publications.

A 2005 study by New California Media, now New America Media, a collaboration of ethnic media organizations in America, showed that ethnic media may be the best way to reach ethnic consumers. Based on polling results, the study concluded that 45 percent of ethnic adults in the United States, or 13 percent of the population, prefer ethnic media over mainstream counterparts. More specifically, 25 percent of Asian Americans prefer ethnic media over mainstream media, according to the study. And, more than half of the adults in the group—including Asian Indians, Filipinos and Japanese—read an ethnic newspaper at least a few times per month.

"All ethnic media, including Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Pakistani and others, have been doing better than the mainstream media," says Koshy Thomas, publisher of *Voice of Asia*, an English-language news weekly he founded in 1987 in Houston, Texas. He claims a circulation of about 23,000 in Texas and 1,200 more subscribers in other states. "The circulation of mainstream papers has declined or at least



Recent issues of Indian Life & Style, one of the many U.S. publications catering to the growing interest in Indian news and culture.

stagnated in the past few years," Thomas says. "It is mainly due to the rise of the Internet and the broadcast media. On the other hand, ethnic papers have grown in general and are not affected by the online news availability. And I expect them to grow further if they keep innovating."

Immigration and ethnic population statistics tell the story of why Indian

Americans' reading habits matter more than ever. Ever since the 2000 U.S. Census, Indian Americans have been widely known as "the wealthiest ethnic group in America." According to the Census, Asian Indians in the United States earn an average 51.6 percent more per household than the total population.

But recent interest in Indian news and culture has grown not just because of the gaining profile of the Indian population in America but because of India itself. India is a hot topic, from the recent Bollywood

dance class craze to outsourcing. America's interest in India has matured from fringe fascination and hippie skirts to a mainstream corporate economic interdependence.

"Consumers in the Indian and U.S. markets seem very hungry for new news on India," LaVigne says. "In just the past decade, India has really shown the world it can compete on a global scale. Big industry players like Microsoft are setting up operations in hopes of tapping into the technology sector."

Between 2001 and 2006, U.S.-India

bilateral trade nearly doubled to more than \$26 billion, according to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative. In April, India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry reported record-high levels of foreign direct investment into India, which nearly tripled in the fiscal year ended March 31 to about \$16 billion, up from \$5.5 billion a year ago. And then there is the well-documented outsourcing boom that also helped put India at center stage.

These developments have strengthened India's economic and business ties with



Courtesy Voice of Asia

Voice of Asia distributors loading their trucks on a Thursday morning for fast delivery to the news stands and retail outlets all over Houston, Texas.

the United States and fueled debate over its status as a potential world power, in turn intensifying the interest in India's culture, politics and economic trends. "The whole world is closely watching and following India's technology lead and surge of related real estate and industrial development," says Hemani Khanna, a regular reader of *Indian Life & Style*, who is an Indian-born U.S. resident. Her job at an American company is to forge strategic partnerships with Indian companies. The "magazine provides me talking points with the partners as well as my customers. Socially, it gives me an edge, and professionally, I am at par with the latest information on India, given the interest generated by the outsourcing industry," Khanna says.

Middle-class Indians' collective wealth and buying power is drawing attention not only in America but in India, also driving the need to understand the culture behind the wealth. "Multinational companies are making a home in India, generating employment, which is resulting in increased per capita income for Indians," Khanna says.

The Associated Press, a U.S.-based news agency, reported that its recent survey of India's top five outsourcing software companies showed that the companies, whose net profits rose 47 percent in the fiscal year ending in March, expect to add 100,000 jobs this fiscal year. "India has a very large consumer base and as the incomes of its citizens rise, so will its demands for new products and services," LaVigne says. "Things like cellular phones and its service providers have taken off in

a way that doesn't seem possible in a U.S. market. The sheer number of consumers is a tremendous opportunity for companies trying to market their products."

Immigrant Indians' interests as readers have gone well beyond keeping ties with the motherland. And Indian American publications have begun to respond. "Indian readers want to know more about India. But the focus is mainly on culture and films, especially Bollywood, and business and trade. Indians who have migrated years ago, and the new generations, are hardly interested in the day-to-day politics of India," says Thomas of *Voice of Asia*. "They would, however, like to know the events which show a trend or indicate a continuation or change in policy. There is a lot of interest in economic development and business opportunities as Indo-Americans always think of India as their first base of foreign operations. They are also interested in further growth of ties between India and the United States at political and economic levels so that the people in both countries can engage in mutually beneficial relationships."

Thomas, nearly 73, was born in Kerala, but emigrated to the United States in 1971 and became an American citizen two years later. "All my ventures are focused on Asia, not only India. Finally, it is all going to be Asia," Thomas says. It is this vision of Asia's prominent future and the need for

a strong media presence that have driven Thomas' publishing business. "Now my dream is to have a newspaper similar to the *Houston Chronicle*. Becoming a broadsheet paper is the first step," he adds.

Sure, stories from the news agencies and community news and advertisements still dominate some Indian American newspapers. But Indian readers as well as non-Indian readers wanting to stay abreast of Indian news now have more options. "If you compare [Indian American newspapers] with papers some 10 or 15 years ago, they have undergone a big change as far as the contents go," Thomas says. "They are not just concentrating on the community events only, as they did earlier, but are also offering a diverse package of community news, India news, entertainment, medical, business and leisure, and the mainstream news which affects the community in general."

Along with more sophisticated content, readers are also getting more original content and unique and more balanced perspectives that are no longer limited to only positive stories about Indian immigrants.

"It's about staying in touch with other Indian Americans and what they are doing, but it's also about learning new things about Indian Americans on the traditional side as well as on the modern side," *ILS* editor LaVigne says. Then she rattled off a list of upcoming stories: one on Bollywood's recent surge in sequels; a profile of Kartar Singh Sarabha, a freedom fighter with San Francisco immigrant roots; a day-in-the-life of three venture capitalists; a profile of Sabita Singh, a cancer survivor who recently became a judge in Massachusetts; the Rajasthan travel journal of an inter-racial American couple; and a story on creating a *Vastu*-safe home.

Melindah Sharma, a 30-year-old Indian American who was born in the United States, reads *ILS* because it "has an interesting perspective that I haven't found in other South Asian American periodicals." She says, "I do like to know politically, culturally what's occurring...not just at home, but on a global front."

While *Voice of Asia's* readership is still mostly within the Indian American and Indian community, according to Thomas, he is also beginning to see a shift toward a broader, cross-cultural interest as well. "Our readership is mostly limited to the community which provides our advertising

base. But I have noticed a growing interest from other communities who want to know about Asian and Indian success stories and want to do business with them.”

Advertising also has evolved as mainstream, corporate America has become aware of ethnic consumers and their spending power. “That is where the corporate clients come in as they wish to attract these ethnic groups....But ethnic media are a powerful tool for advertisers looking to spend a little less and hit a specific market head on,” LaVigne says.

The Indian American population explosion in the last 20 years has brought more Indians into positions of power, created established Indian-owned businesses with the means to expand their advertising budgets and more mainstream companies looking to capitalize on their spending power.

“Initially, Indian newspapers had to survive on the ads from community members only. The revenues were barely enough to keep us afloat,” says Thomas. “But things started changing slowly as the small businesses set up by the community members did better. In the past five years or so, we are getting the attention of mainstream companies. The Indo-American community is one of the richest ethnic groups in the United States and has more spending power than other comparable groups. The mainstream companies have noticed this and are adapting their marketing strategy to reach out to different ethnic groups individually.”

But like the mainstream media, Indian American media have had to fight to stay relevant in the Internet Age. According to Thomas, the value for readers is in tailoring stories.

The publications take on the job of sifting through news agency articles and mainstream press stories to find items about Indians and Indian Americans and news from the subcontinent itself to cater to their readers’ interests.

“No newspaper can offer anything which is not there on the Net in some form or the other, except for exclusive interviews or analytical reports or columns,” says Thomas.

“The success of a newspaper lies in tai-

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Diana Rohini LaVigne, online editor of Indian Life & Style magazine, works on the magazine Web site in her San Leandro, California, office.



Koshy Thomas, publisher of Voice of Asia.

loring a package of information which its readers want to know. The individual components of the package may be available on the Net but it may take a lot of time to search and find and get the right perspectives....”

Despite the growth, however, ethnic media still struggle, LaVigne and Thomas agree. Readers as well as advertisers are flocking to the Internet,

creating a financial crisis for print publications. And, like the rest of the news industry, Indian American media have gone through the same consolidation as mainstream media.

“There has not been a big change in the number of Indian newspapers recently. Of course, new papers come on the market and then go away,” Thomas says. “It is a tough market. The readership is limited, the advertising rates are low and the cost of production keeps rising. The only reason we have grown is that we have been able to innovate. Since we are small, we have the flexibility to adapt quickly to a new situation. But I do see a vast scope for future expansion which will be driven by both readers and advertisers....The need today is to try new ideas.”

And for Thomas, that means tapping into a cross-cultural readership with cross-cultural coverage.

About a year ago, Thomas started *Asian Business Journal*, a glossy monthly magazine focused on Asian, including Indian, business success stories. He plans on making it a cross-cultural platform for business news across Asian communities in Texas.

“It is in the nature of an immigrant to try to keep the links with their countries of origin,” Thomas says. “But with every successive generation, the link keeps getting weaker and weaker. What may keep it strong is culture and business. As long as these links are strong and are growing, there will always be a need to know more about a country you are doing business with.”

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